

How would you define a healthy school culture and what strategies could you use to improve a school's culture?

Thinking about cultures that exist within schools and how administrators can effectively lead within a school culture, Hoyle, English, and Steffy (1998) state, “to get a better handle on the district and school culture, school leaders must cultivate the culture, captivate the culture, and celebrate the culture” (pg. 5). A healthy school culture is one that revolves around improving student achievement through collaboration, effective communication, the creation of a safe environment, and creativity in relation to instructional strategies. In order to establish a school culture centered on the above-mentioned qualities, educational leaders must follow the advice of Hoyle (1998) and grow, energize, and facilitate the desired culture within students, staff, and community stakeholders.

“Culture is the way things are done in an organization that make it different, unique, and compelling.” (Hackmann, Schmitt-Oliver, & Tracy 2002 pg. 62). Just because the school “has always done things this way” does not mean that it should continue on the same path. In schools, the existing culture can be a critical component in relation to student achievement, student/staff satisfaction, and community approval. It is important for educational leaders to foster and support a positive school culture in which all students and staff feel safe to teach and learn, collaborate with one another, and are appropriately challenged educationally and professionally. Hackman et.al (2002) goes on to further state, “school leaders who develop strong, positive cultures become aware of the direct link between these cultures and improved teaching and learning” (pg. 64). Teaching and learning are the two main purposes of schools

and it is up to the educational leader to ensure that the highest qualities of both teaching and learning are present throughout each and every classroom in the school.

Educational leaders are not left alone in the struggles that being a positive culture change agent can bring. Robert Marzano and his educational associates have devoted large amounts of time and research to the creation of high reliability schools. According to Marzano et.al. (2014) establishing and maintaining a safe and collaborative culture is the first step in creating and developing a high reliability school. In his book, A Handbook for High Reliability Schools, Robert Marzano provides a road map for educational leaders wishing to help lead their schools in establishing a safe and collaborative culture. One technique that is suggested for educational leaders is to conduct what the military calls FOD walks (Marzano, Warrick, & Simms 2014). During a FOD walk, military personnel line up shoulder-to-shoulder and walk the designated area in search for foreign objects and debris. This is the military's version of a quality control check method. In schools educational leaders can do the same thing by walking through the schools and examining what is happening in the halls, classrooms, outside, etc. Administrators can also speak with students, teachers, staff, and community members present in the school and get "quick data" on the school's culture (Marzano, Warrick, & Simms 2014).

If administrators are truly acting as educational leaders and change agents, they must ensure that they support and facilitate a school culture that is centered on improving student achievement. When improving student achievement is at the forefront of a vision of leadership and culture, a safe learning environment, student/teacher satisfaction, and community approval will follow suit due to the fact that all decisions made and actions taken are clearly related to shared goals and beliefs.

A second strategy that can be implemented by instructional leaders that promotes and facilitates a culture centered on improving student achievement is the promotion and support of meaningful and effective professional development for instructional staff members. Educational leaders and teachers do not know everything there is to know about teaching and learning, nor will we. Educators of all levels need help and sufficient support in order to have a profound positive impact on student achievement in the classroom. As an instructional leader, it is up to the principal to provide a means of support and demonstrate the importance of lifelong learning amongst the educational staff. When examining professional development needs, it is important for educational leaders to examine student data, school goals, and teacher need. In addition, professional development should not be done to teachers. In order for professional development to be effective, it should be organized for teachers in order to grow instructionally and professionally.

References:

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